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ABSTRACT

Analyzed is the development of marketing strategies at two major universities that have been successful in reversing enrollment declines that they experienced in the early 1970's. First, the organizational context of recruiting and admissions is examined, and the major phases of the admissions calendar are reviewed. Then the application of marketing research is examined, and the basic elements of marketing strategy are discussed. Some conclusions are reached and expressed. (MSE)

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DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A MARKETING STRATEGY FOR COLLEGE RECRUITING AND ADMISSIONS

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Abstract

This paper is part of a symposium on the application of marketing research and planning techniques to college recruiting and admissions. The authors analyze the development of marketing strategies at two major universities that have been successful in reversing enrollment declines which they experienced in the early 1970s. The first section of the paper examines the organizational context of college recruiting and admissions. The second section reviews the major phases of the admissions calendar. The third section examines the application of marketing research. In the fourth section, the authors discuss the basic elements of marketing strategy. The final section summarizes the paper and presents the authors' conclusions.

Introduction

In the context of this symposium, the purpose of the present paper is to provide an overview of the process by which marketing strategies are developed to support college recruiting and admissions. The choice of the term "strategy" is deliberate. Marketing strategy involves not only the application of marketing research and planning but also the integration of these techniques with the ongoing admissions programs of an institution. The focus of this paper is on this integrative process.

The paper examines the development of marketing strategies at two major universities that have successfully employed marketing techniques to reverse enrollment declines which they experienced during the early 1970s. The major sources of data for this report are field trips to the two institutions during the Spring of 1977 and a series of documents that describe their marketing and admissions programs. One of the authors visited a third major university which has had major success in the admissions area without the help of marketing research. Periodic reference will be made to the admissions strategies of this institution as well. For purposes of this analysis, the institutions will be referred to as Northern University, Southern University, and Western University, respectively. Two of the institutions are public and the other is private.

The paper consists of five major sections. The first section focuses on the organization of recruiting and admissions activities at the institutions studied--specifically, formal reporting relationships, informal working relationships, the role of the "idea man," and community participation. The second section examines the basic elements of the admissions calendar: recruiting, admissions, and postadmissions followup. The third section focuses on the application of several marketing research concepts, including the image study, institutional positioning, consumer behavior, segmentation analysis, and evaluation.

The fourth section examines the linkages between marketing research and the basic elements of a marketing strategy: the development of a recruiting theme, media campaigns, influencing applicant behavior, market segmentation, and the development of new recruiting and admissions programs. The fifth and final section summarizes the paper and presents the authors' conclusions.

Organization: The Structure of Recruiting and Admissions

The first major element of our study was an effort to establish the organizational context of the recruiting and admissions processes at the institutions studied. As noted above, we found four aspects of organization to be of particular interest: formal organizational relationships, informal working relationships, the role of the "idea man," and the participation of the academic community.

With regard to formal relationships, we found that one of the keys to the development of a coherent marketing strategy was the integration of the staff functions that deal with the institution's relationship with its external environment. These staff functions include admissions, recruiting, financial aid, public relations, development, and alumni affairs. Although common reporting relationships do not necessarily reflect functional integration, it is noteworthy that at the first two institutions we examined the administrators responsible for each of the above functions all had direct or indirect reporting relationships with a single executive officer--in one case the vice chancellor and in the other the vice president for external affairs. At Western University, which has not yet engaged in formal marketing activities, the reporting line for public relations and development is separate from that of the other functions.

The development of informal working relationships is at least as important as formal organizational structure. In this regard, we found at least two elements to be particularly critical--the relationship between the admissions

officer and the responsible executive officer and the relationship between admissions and the other external relations functions of the institution--especially public relations. There was evidence of a high level of senior executive involvement at all three institutions. With regard to lateral relationships, all three admissions officers reported close and effective working relationships with public relations. This type of relationship was not always in evidence among admissions, financial aid, and alumni affairs.

The third major element of organization relevant to the development of a marketing strategy is the central role of the "idea man." At both of the institutions that have employed marketing techniques, there is a key individual at the center of the institution's marketing activities--in one case the director of admissions and in the other the director of public relations. Both individuals have close working relationships with senior executive officers of their respective institutions. Although formal marketing activities have not been introduced at the third institution, the director of admissions appears to play a comparable role in the maintenance of a highly effective admissions program.

The fourth major organizational feature of the three admissions programs examined is a university-wide committee that consults with the director of admissions and his immediate superior in the development of admissions strategy. None of these committees plays a role in the day-to-day operation of the admissions program, but all three play an important role in providing a vehicle for communication between the academic community and the admissions staff.

The Admissions Calendar

A second important element of the context in which marketing research and planning takes place is the annual admissions calendar. The calendars of the three institutions studied consist of three overlapping phases: recruiting, processing applications, and postadmissions followup.

With respect to recruiting, all three institutions contact the majority of their prospects through the College Entrance Examination Board's Student Search Service. As of Spring 1977, one of the institutions examined had a highly sophisticated, computerized "prospect tracking system," which the institution utilized to keep track of all student contacts and to monitor the status of each individual application. The other two institutions were not far behind in the development of such a system. A fully developed prospect tracking system enables the institution to personalize its relationship with each prospect, to evaluate the effectiveness of each type of student contact, to generate lists of names for regional admissions activities, and to avoid duplicate mailings to individual prospects.

Two of the institutions have fairly standard procedures for processing applications. Informal "assurances" of admission are sent during the months of January and February to applicants who are clearly qualified. During March and April, formal offers of admission are sent to all accepted applicants. In one case, financial aid offers are sent along with offers of admission to all applicants who qualify. In the other case, financial aid offers are made subsequent to the formal offer of admission but prior to the applicant's reply date. The third institution has a rolling admissions plan, in which qualified applicants are accepted as soon as their admissions files are complete.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to describe all the recruiting and admissions activities of the three institutions in detail, it is noteworthy that the basic admissions programs of these institutions include a considerable variety of activities designed to secure applications, to induce the successful applicant to accept an offer of admission, and to maintain interest in the institution after an offer has been accepted. In the present context, the significance of these activities is twofold. First, the implementation of many of these activities preceded the introduction of marketing research and

planning. Second, from an evaluation standpoint, it is very difficult to separate the effects of marketing techniques from the results achieved through the basic admissions program.

The Application of Marketing Research

The use of marketing research in support of college admissions and recruiting involves the application of several marketing research concepts. An institutional image study is an exploration of internal and external perceptions of the institution. A closely related concept, institutional positioning, refers to the process of comparing the institution's image with the images of its competitors, thereby enabling the institution to define its place in the market. The study of consumer behavior focuses on the process by which the individual applicant selects a college and the influences that come to bear on that decision. Market segmentation refers to the process of analyzing the different needs and interests of the institution's various student clienteles. The final phase of marketing research is the evaluation of the marketing and recruiting tactics which are employed.

The institutions we examined have applied each of these marketing research concepts, with varying degrees of success. However, any effort to examine the application of each of these concepts in isolation from one another would result in an artificial structuring and fragmentation of the marketing research process. The description of marketing research activities that follows is therefore based on the case study approach. We will return to the individual concepts in the next section, when we examine the linkages between marketing research and the development of a marketing strategy.

Northern University's interest in marketing originated in the early 1970s in response to a decline in institutional enrollments. Their first marketing effort involved relatively little research. The focus of activity was on

the development of a comprehensive publications program designed to stress the cultural and educational resources available in the metropolitan area which the institution serves. This campaign appears to have been a key element in the institution's successful efforts between 1972-1977 to reverse their enrollment decline.

In early 1977, the president of the university appointed a university-wide task force to evaluate the effectiveness of Northern University's recruiting and admissions publications program. After reviewing proposals from three different advertising firms to conduct a marketing research study, the task force recommended that the institution accept a proposal from the same advertising firm that had conducted the earlier campaign. The advertising firm, in turn, subcontracted with a marketing research firm to conduct a survey of the university's various admissions constituencies.

The survey involved the development and administration of seven different questionnaires to seven constituencies within a total sample of 2,500. The constituencies surveyed either by mail, personal interview, or telephone included samples of current Northern University freshmen, high school seniors, guidance counselors, successful applicants who chose not to enroll at Northern University, parents, and transfer students. The samples surveyed were national in scope, with greatest emphasis placed on the institution's major recruiting areas.

The issues covered in this study were broad in scope, with some variation among the groups surveyed. Because the results of the survey had not yet been disseminated within the institution at the time of our investigation, many of the findings that related specifically to Northern University as an institution were still classified as confidential. However, some of the results in the area of "consumer behavior" are of interest to the academic community at large. First, the study found that "academic reputation," a critical factor in student decisions, is based primarily on hearsay. Second, while parents are

concerned about costs, many are willing to borrow whatever they need to obtain a good college education for their children. Third, there was some evidence that the pendulum may be swinging back from the recent emphasis on career education among high school students and their parents. Fourth, a series of questions dealing with sources of information about colleges yielded a number of interesting results: (1) high school guidance counselors place much greater confidence in national college directories than do high school students, but students give greater credibility to these directories than they do to college publications; (2) among the sources of information that students value most are campus visits, conversations with students and alumni, advice from high school teachers, and advice from friends; and (3) among the sources of information which students value least are visits by college representatives to their high schools and college fairs.

Southern University also experienced an enrollment decline in the early 1970s. In response, the chancellor appointed a university-wide recruitment committee, consisting of faculty, administrators, and students, to explore ways of reversing the enrollment decline. After investigating the options, the recruitment committee recommended that the university commission a marketing research firm to perform an image study.

The study consisted of a telephone survey of random samples of high school students (grades 9 to 12), junior college students, parents of high school students, and university alumni. A total of 1,024 interviews were completed (256 for each of the four segments). The results of the study indicated that the university had a strong academic reputation, that its costs were perceived to be the highest in the state, that insufficient attention seemed to be given to career preparation, that many respondents felt that the university catered primarily to the wealthy and elite, and that the institution was perceived as impersonal and unresponsive. The recruiting and admissions strategy that evolved

from this study will be examined in the next section.

The next phase of Southern University's marketing research effort is of particular interest to the institutional research community because it was conducted by internal staff members. Following a successful campaign to increase university enrollments by 20 percent over a two-year period, the public relations staff of the university replicated the initial study in order to determine the extent to which the university's image had been improved. The second survey indicated that the impressions of the university among high school students and their parents had improved substantially in areas where the university had already been perceived as strong relative to the other major institutions in the state. These areas included the value of a Southern University degree, its academic standards, and its extracurricular and cultural activities. Lesser gains were made in the areas of student orientation, relative costs, and friendliness. The results of this study suggest two important observations. First, one of the major payoffs of a marketing program is to increase the visibility of the institution in areas where it is already perceived to be strong. Second, it is easier to capitalize upon an institution's strengths than it is to overcome its perceived weaknesses.

As already noted, Western University has not yet engaged in formal marketing research. However, it has conducted two small-scale admissions studies which are worthy of note. The first was an effort to track the admissions yield of the various high schools in its recruit[illegible] area. This effort has enabled the admissions office to determine which high schools are producing the highest yields and which high schools require greater attention. The second study was an analysis of application overlaps with the other major institutions in the state. This study indicated that there was minimal overlap--that is, that Western University had a clearly defined "market position" within the state.

Developing a Marketing Strategy

A number of marketing research concepts were introduced at the beginning of the last section. It was noted at that time that it is difficult to associate each of these concepts with a distinct phase of the marketing research process. It is also difficult to associate each of these research concepts with a distinct element of marketing strategy. However, we think it is useful to attempt to draw some direct conceptual linkages between marketing research and the elements of a marketing strategy.

The major elements of a marketing strategy and their conceptual counterparts in marketing research are as follows. The first two elements of marketing strategy are the development of a recruiting theme and the implementation of a media campaign to project that theme. The closest counterparts to these elements in the research process are the image study and institutional positioning. A third element in marketing strategy is the development of specific tactics designed to generate applications and enrollments. The most important phase of marketing research in this regard is the study of consumer behavior. A fourth element of marketing strategy is the development of targeted marketing approaches--that is a series of recruiting tactics oriented toward the specific needs of different segments of the student market. The counterpart in marketing research is segmentation analysis. The fifth and final element of marketing strategy is the constant assessment and modification of recruiting tactics. The research counterpart of this element is evaluation. The remainder of this section will focus on each of the elements of marketing strategy as they have evolved at the institutions studied.

Both of the institutions that have engaged in marketing research have devised thematic recruiting campaigns. As already noted, Northern University stresses the cultural and educational resources of the metropolitan area in

which it is located. In addition, in order to overcome the institution's traditional image as a business school, the university has stressed the quality and diversity of its academic programs. In response to the results of its first image study, Southern University has developed a campaign that stresses the vitality and responsiveness of the institution. Both Northern University and Southern University have developed extensive media campaigns--the second element of a marketing strategy, designed to project a visible and positive institutional image based on the themes just described. Although Western University has not developed a comparable recruiting theme and media campaign, its highly student-oriented admissions program probably qualifies as an equally viable strategy.

Northern University and Southern University also have elaborate recruiting and admissions publications programs centered in part around the themes just described. These publications programs are oriented toward the third element of a marketing strategy--generating applications and enrollments. All three institutions have moved toward a carefully timed and sequential series of mailings designed to provide the applicant with increasingly detailed information about the institution, as the institution becomes aware of the applicant's specific interests.

It was suggested above that the study of consumer behavior can also contribute to an institution's ability to attract applications and enrollments. In this area, it is sometimes difficult to isolate the impact of marketing research from the impact of traditional admissions efforts to respond to the needs and interests of the prospective student. In fact, most successful admissions officers were students of consumer behavior long before marketing research was introduced. With this caveat in mind, some of the major tactics that have evolved from the study of consumer behavior are increased efforts to "influence the influencers" (guidance counselors, teachers, etc.), efforts to

maximize applicant contact with the institution, and the use of financial aid packaging to compete for highly qualified prospects.

There is probably a more direct linkage between marketing research and the fourth element of a marketing strategy: market segmentation. It is not necessary to employ marketing research to define the segments of a student market. However, segmentation analysis has been helpful to both Northern University and Southern University in identifying the specific needs and interests of different market segments. Southern University, for example, has oriented some of its recruiting literature toward the different needs and interests of high school students, junior college students, and veterans. Northern University has begun to identify some variations in the interests of its urban and suburban clienteles. Despite its conceptual appeal, however, market segmentation is probably the least developed element of marketing strategy that we have examined thus far.

The final element of marketing strategy is the process of program evaluation and modification. Although the problems involved in evaluation are by no means unique to the admissions area, this aspect of marketing research and planning is at a fairly elementary stage of development--at least at the institutions studied. These institutions have achieved some important results, but there is little systematic evidence linking their enrollment gains directly to their marketing efforts or to any of the specific programs and tactics that have evolved from those efforts. In the context of finite resources and ongoing experimentation with expensive new recruiting techniques, the absence of effective evaluation is currently one of the most critical problem areas in marketing research and admissions programming in general.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been to examine the development of marketing strategy as a process of integrating marketing research and planning with

the ongoing admissions programs of an institution. The first section of the paper discussed the organizational context of admissions and recruiting. Four major observations were offered. First, there is a need for formal integration of the staff functions that deal with the institution's relationship with its external environment. Second, it is particularly important for the admissions office to develop a close working relationship with public relations. Third, the relationship between the "idea man" at the center of the institution's marketing activities and the responsible executive officer is critical. Fourth, community support and participation appear to be key elements in the development of an effective admissions strategy.

The second section examined the three basic phases of the admissions calendar: recruiting, the processing of applications, and postadmissions followup. Particular emphasis was placed on the potential value of a computerized "prospect tracking system" for both recruiting and processing applications. It is important to emphasize that marketing research and planning must occur alongside and hopefully in harmony with the basic recruiting and admissions activities of the institution. It was also noted that, from an evaluation standpoint, it is often difficult to separate the effects of marketing research and planning from the results achieved through a basic admissions program.

In the third section of the paper, the authors suggested that there are at least five marketing research concepts that are applicable to college admissions and recruiting: the institutional image study, institutional positioning, consumer behavior, market segmentation, and evaluation. It was noted, however, that it is difficult to associate each of these concepts with a distinct phase of marketing research. The research efforts described had three major characteristics: (1) the use of survey research, (2) a sampling of several different external and internal constituencies, and (3) the use of external marketing consultants.

In the fourth section, an effort was made to link the five concepts of marketing research with the basic elements of a marketing strategy. Both of the institutions that have engaged in marketing research have employed the first two elements of marketing strategy--the development of a recruiting theme and the implementation of a media campaign to project that theme. The third element of a marketing strategy, the generation of applications and enrollments, is a little more difficult to separate from traditional admissions activities. Most noteworthy among the contributions of marketing research in this area is the development of carefully timed and sequential series of mailings designed to provide the applicant with increasingly detailed information about the institution, as the institution becomes aware of the applicant's specific interests. The fourth element of a marketing strategy, market segmentation and the development of targeted recruiting tactics, is in need of further development. However, the authors found that the most critical problem in the area of marketing and admissions programming in general is the lack of systematic evaluation.

Four general observations emerge from this study of marketing strategy. First, although Northern University and Southern University have achieved important results in the admissions area over the past five years, it is not clear that every institution must engage in formal marketing research in order to survive in today's competitive market. Western University has operated successfully without formal marketing research. Moreover, many institutions will undoubtedly reap the benefits of the pioneer work in this field. Second, in the absence of systematic evaluation it is difficult to isolate the effects of marketing research and planning from the results achieved through more traditional admissions efforts to respond to the needs and interests of prospective students. Third, it is apparent that marketing research and planning have focused primarily on "packaging" and communicating what an institution has to offer. Although this is certainly a worthwhile endeavor, it is also important to supplement

communications efforts with the development of new programs and services. Finally, it is possible that the application of marketing research and planning techniques to college recruiting and admissions will have a number of desirable consequences for higher education--including the development of better educational services, better informed student decisions, and perhaps even an expansion of our clientele.